

Sleep and Aging

More than half of men and women over the age of 65 complain of at least one sleep problem. Many aging people experience insomnia and other sleep disorders on a regular basis.

As we get older, our sleep patterns change. In general, older people sleep less, experience more fragmented sleep, and spend less time in stages 3 & 4 and REM sleep (for example, deep sleep and dream sleep) than younger people. However, regardless of age, good restorative sleep is essential to physical health and emotional well-being.

What Causes Sleep Problems in Older People?

Several factors may contribute to the inability to sleep well as we get older. Some common causes include:

- **Poor sleep habits:** Irregular sleep-wake patterns can affect an individual's circadian rhythm and make it hard to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Other sleep hygiene issues, such as consumption of alcohol before bedtime, increased wakeful time in bed, or daytime napping, can also affect a person's ability to sleep.
- **Medications:** Some drugs may impair a person's ability to fall asleep or stay asleep and may even stimulate wakefulness at night.
- **Psychological distress or psychiatric disorders:** Aging is characterized by a lot of life events, some positive and some negative. Some elderly people experience psychological problems or psychiatric disorders that will affect the quality and quantity of sleep. For example, life changes such as the death of a loved one, moving from a family home, or physical limitations due to illness can cause significant stress and sleep problems.
- **Sleep disorders:** Sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, periodic limb movement disorder, and REM behavior disorder, may be associated with aging in some cases.
- **Retirement:** Retirement often leads to a lot of downtime with less daytime activity; this can lead to an irregular sleep-wake schedule and chronic sleep problems.

Are You Getting Enough Sleep?

Regardless of age, every person's sleep needs are different. If you are getting less sleep than when you were younger, but still feel rested and energetic during the day, it might just be that you now need less sleep. However, if you are noticing that your lack of sleep is affecting your daytime activities, you should talk to your doctor. There are steps you can take to improve your sleep quality.

SOURCES:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. The National Sleep Foundation.

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